

Personal myth

Application 1

The film Phoenix is the mythological framework we are using for this module.

Phoenix is a 2014 German drama film directed by Christian Petzold. Loosely adapted from the 1961 novel *Le Retour des Cendres* (English: *The Return from the Ashes*) by French author Hubert Monteilhet, the film stars Nina Hoss and Ronald Zehrfeld as Nelly and Johnny Lenz, respectively.

Plot: The film follows Nelly Lenz, a Holocaust survivor and former cabaret singer, who returns to Berlin after undergoing facial reconstruction surgery for damage caused by a bullet wound. Following the end of World War II and the liberation of the concentration camps, Nelly returns to Germany with her friend Lene. Here, Lene takes Nelly to a reconstructive plastic surgeon. Although Nelly tells the surgeon that she would like to look exactly as she used to, he is unable to recreate her old face completely and Nelly is disappointed with the final result.

Lene finds an apartment for her and Nelly. Since Nelly's family members all died during the war, Nelly has inherited a considerable amount of money. Lene suggests to Nelly that she collect the money and that the two of them travel to Palestine. She believes they will be safe there and can help with the creation of an independent Jewish state.

Although Lene warns Nelly that her husband Johnny may have been the one to betray her to the Nazis, Nelly denies this possibility. She leaves the apartment at night to find him. She finds Johnny working in a nightclub called Phoenix. Johnny fails to recognize her, yet says later that she bears an uncanny resemblance to his late wife, Nelly. In order to obtain his wife's inheritance, he asks Nelly to impersonate his wife.

Johnny slowly transforms Nelly into an image and performer of her previous self before her arrest. Nelly goes along with Johnny's plan and keeps her true identity concealed, telling Johnny that her name is Esther. Although Lene continues to warn Nelly that Johnny was possibly complicit in her arrest, Nelly maintains a romantic view of the relationship. As Esther, she questions Johnny about his feelings for his wife and his behaviour at the time of her arrest. Johnny avoids answering most of Nelly's questions, wanting her to concentrate on learning to impersonate his wife. Johnny tells Nelly that he plans to stage her "return" from the camps within the week, and invites several of the couple's old friends to meet her with him at the train station.

After spending several days with Johnny, Nelly returns to the apartment she shares with Lene. Here, the landlady informs her that Lene has killed herself, leaving behind a note for Nelly. In this note, Lene admits to Nelly that she knows that Johnny divorced Nelly the day before her arrest. She includes a copy of the divorce decree, which forces Nelly to accept Johnny's betrayal.

Nelly keeps this knowledge a secret, meeting Johnny and their old friends at the train station as planned. Later, at the home of one of the friends, Nelly invites the group to listen to her sing, accompanied by Johnny on piano. As Nelly sings, Johnny recognizes her voice and sees the number tattooed on her arm when she was a prisoner in the concentration camps....

Identifying the archetypal players in your personal myth.

As I mentioned in the lecture, the way to view the film, in this case Phoenix, from a psychoanalytic perspective is as a dream. So, what we see in Phoenix is Nelly as the dream ego (the dreamer) and the characters she interacts with as the archetypal avatars in her psyche.

In doing your application, I want you to apply the same interpretive lens to your own walking life.

With this in mind:

Identify the inner and outer archetypes in your myth, with focus on: the persona, the ego, the shadow and the anima and animus.

- Identify and characterise these archetypes in your own inner psychic economy (inner world) and idealisations or denigrations of these in your umwelt (outer world).
- Compare these inner and outer images.
- Identify the central mythological character each of these archetypes embodies, e.g. hero, victim, saboteur, seducer, tyrant, dragon....and so on. I.e. what myth is each archetype invested in?